

Feeding Birds

► Find instructions for everything you need to get started—buying and mixing feed, providing water, making a simple suet feeder or building an automatic platform feeder, and warding off squirrels, pigeons, and neighborhood cats. Also lists native plants that will attract birds year-round, as well as species you can expect to see in Alabama summer and winter.

As interest in wildlife has grown in recent years, the fascination of attracting birds to feeding stations has also grown. More than 62 million Americans feed birds around their homes, and many people maintain natural areas and plantings for birds, as well. Bird feeding is especially popular in Alabama, where winter migrants readily flock to feeders and provide many hours of watching pleasure for backyard birders.

When to Feed

Bird feeding is generally believed to be a winter activity, but it really can be a year-round hobby. Fewer birds will use feeders in summer, but those species that do will reward their human hosts by bringing new offspring to the feeders, too. The pleasure of seeing a young chickadee begging for food from its parents will make summer feeding well worth the effort.

During the summer in Alabama, you can expect to see chickadees, titmice, cardinals, blue jays, and several other resident seed-eaters at your feeders. In addition to these birds, during the winter you can expect to see goldfinches, house finches (in northern Alabama), purple finches, pine siskins (most winters), nuthatches, towhees, juncos, white-throated sparrows, and ruby-crowned kinglets. Other migrating species may also be seen briefly during the fall and spring as they pass through the state of Alabama.

Winter feeding is probably more appreciated by birds than summer feeding. This is especially true of those species that would normally migrate further south but instead stop briefly here in areas with feeding stations. So, in all fairness to the birds, fall and winter feeding, once begun, should not end until well into the spring months when other food sources are plentiful or until the birds have begun to migrate to northern breeding areas.

Types of Bird Feeders

Seed Feeders. Many different feeders are available and should be chosen according to the birds you wish to attract. Basic platform feeders are favorites because they generally hold a lot of seeds and provide a perching area for several birds at a time (Figure 1). Covered platform feeders are recommended because they protect food from rain or snow.

Many types of hanging feeders, including tube feeders and bowl feeders, are also available. Hanging feeders, especially those with small perches, attract smaller

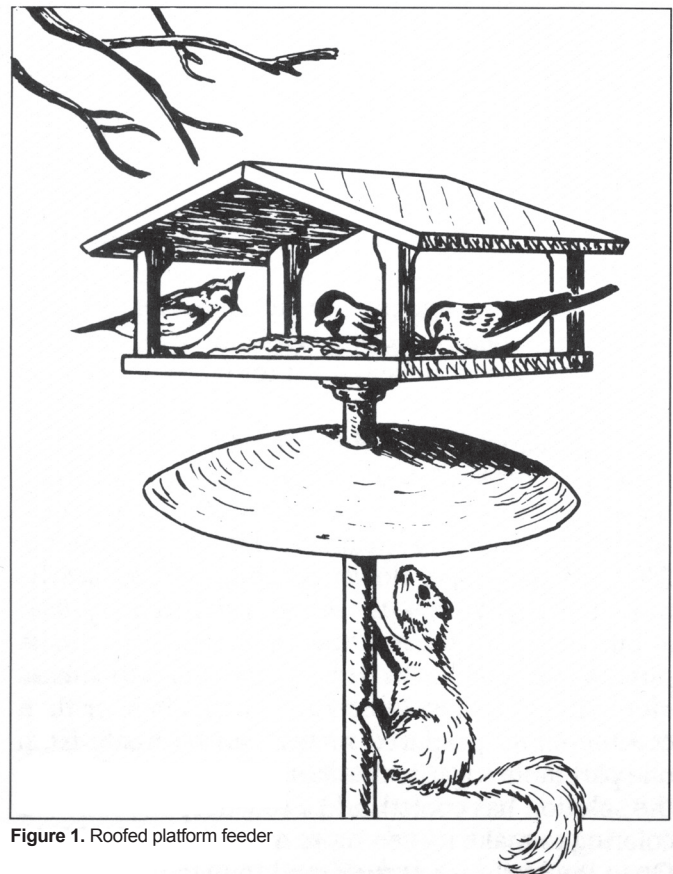


Figure 1. Roofed platform feeder

songbirds and will be used less frequently by larger birds, like cardinals and jays, that rarely feed on swaying feeders.

Regardless of the type of seed or mix used, feeders should be cleaned regularly with hot water and detergent. All wet or moldy food should be removed immediately from feeders and from areas near feeders. Moldy food can poison birds.

Suet Feeders. Many species of birds not attracted to seed feeders will be drawn to suet feeders (Figure 2). *Suet*, a hard type of beef fat which can be obtained from your butcher, provides birds with a high-energy winter food. Suet can be dispensed in cages, baskets, bags, logs, pinecones, and other imaginative dispensers and will attract birds that normally eat insects. Thrashers, flickers, woodpeckers, thrushes, kinglets, wrens, catbirds, orioles, juncos, and sparrows are a few of the many birds found locally that feed regularly at suet feeders.



Figure 2. Suet feeder

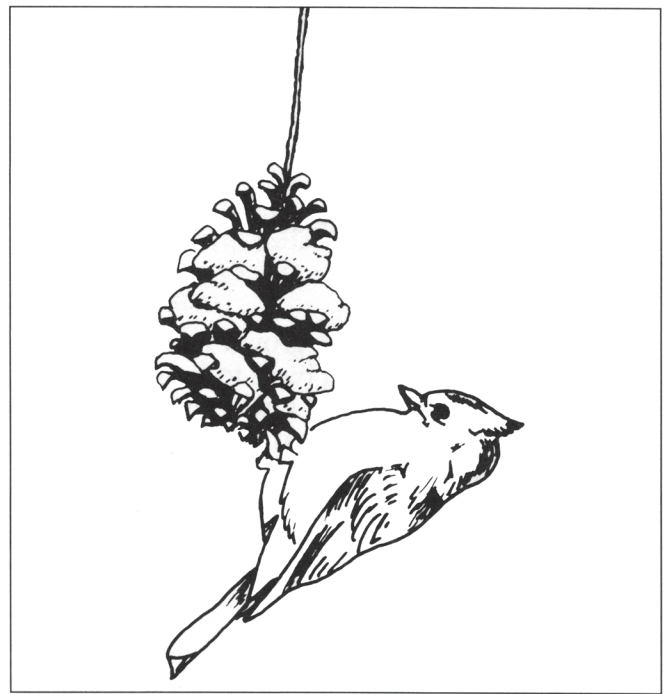


Figure 3. Pinecone feeder

You can make a suet feeder very easily using $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch hardware cloth or a plastic mesh bag with fairly large mesh. Cage-like feeders constructed with hardware cloth should be attached to trees 5 to 6 feet above the ground. Leave the top of the cage open so new suet can be added easily. Plastic mesh bags (from oranges or onions) are excellent suet dispensers and can be attached with strong cords to tree limbs or trunks.

You can make a suet log by drilling several holes (1 inch in diameter) into a short branch or log (about 1- $\frac{1}{2}$ feet long). Then, press suet into the holes, and suspend the log by a hook placed at the top. Another simple and natural way to provide suet is to press it into pinecones and then hang the cones from tree limbs (Figure 3). These cones are very attractive to small songbirds. You can also purchase special feeders to hold cakes of suet or bird cakes. Bird cakes can be purchased or made at home. Birds also like bird cakes made of suet mixed with seeds.

When making bird cakes, ask your butcher to run the suet through a grinder on a coarse setting. Ground suet is easier to melt. Bird cakes are made by melting the ground suet in a pan with a small amount of water and then pouring the suet into muffin pans to cool. Mixed seeds or even nuts can be added to the hot suet to create an appealing mixture for birds. If acquiring suet is difficult, a substitute food can be mixed from one part

vegetable shortening, one part peanut butter, three parts yellow cornmeal, one part cracked corn, and one part flour. This mixture is great for use in log feeders and pinecones.

Hummingbird Feeders. Another bird easily attracted to special feeding stations is the ruby-throated hummingbird. This nectar-eating bird spends summers in Alabama and is a joy to observe. Although proper flower plantings attract the most hummingbirds, these birds readily feed at hummingbird feeders, too. Special feeders can be purchased along with either dry or liquid mixes. Homemade mixes, which are much less expensive than commercially prepared mixes, can be made from one part table sugar to four parts warm water. When the solution has cooled, add a few drops of red food coloring to make it even more attractive to birds. Once birds are accustomed to using a feeder, coloring is no longer necessary. Honey should *never* be placed in feeders because hummingbirds are unable to digest honey solutions. Birds that feed at stations with honey solutions will, in fact, starve. Artificial sweeteners should *never* be used in feeders either.

Hummingbird feeders should be filled beginning in April or May and can remain in place until the last hummingbird has migrated in the fall. Leaving feeders up in the fall does not prevent hummingbirds from migrating. Place feeders at sites that are not visible from other hummingbird feeders. Hummingbirds are highly territorial and fiercely guard a station, or several stations, if feeders are within sight of one another. Clean feeders regularly, and replace any solution left in a feeder after a week. You should place bee guards on feeders if bees become numerous. Hummingbirds will desert feeders if they must compete with bees.

Types of Feed

Sunflower seeds attract the widest variety of birds and are recommended for hanging and pole-mounted feeders. Smaller, black, oil-type sunflower seeds are preferred by most songbirds.

When using mixed seeds, avoid mixes containing milo, wheat, oats, rye, or rice. These seeds do not appeal to most songbirds and attract nuisance birds, like pigeons and starlings. Mixes containing sunflower seeds, white proso millet, peanut hearts, cracked corn, and safflower are preferable, but they are generally more expensive. Cracked corn and mixed seeds make excellent feeds to spread on the ground. Ground feeding attracts a larger number of birds at one time than hanging or even platform feeders.

Thistle seeds, placed in special tube feeders with tiny openings, are relished by goldfinches, a favorite wintering bird species for many Alabamians.

Bird Feeder Pests

In most areas, it is essential that seed feeders be squirrel-proof. Squirrels not only eat bird seed but also chew on feeders. They can also cut the strings suspending feeders from limbs. Try suspending the feeders at least 5 feet above the ground and 8 feet from the nearest tree trunk or limb. Baffles (cone-shaped sheet metal barriers that prevent squirrels from approaching feeders) are helpful and, in many cases, essential (Figure 4). Squirrels can also be drawn away from a feeder by dried, shucked ears of corn dangling from a nearby sturdy limb. If these measures are not enough, specially designed squirrel-proof feeders can be purchased.

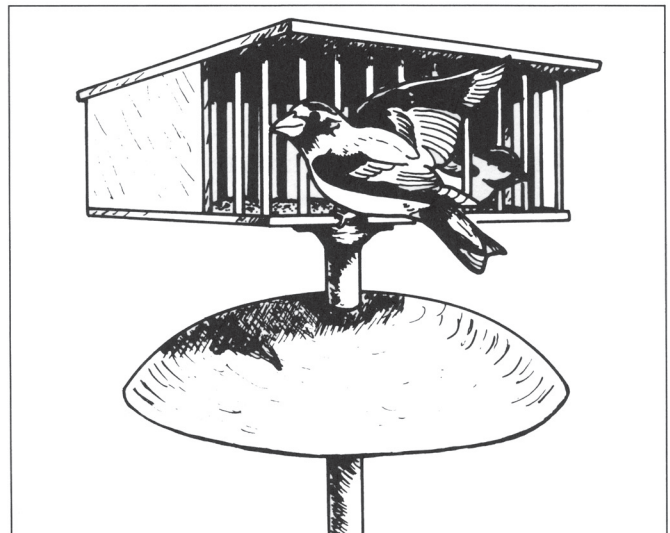


Figure 4. Doweled feeder with baffle

Other feeding station pests include birds such as pigeons, starlings, and English sparrows. Using small, tube-type feeders with sunflower seeds generally discourages these birds. Pigeons and grackles (which tend to flock) can be discouraged by small dowels, placed about 1 inch apart, around seed feeders. This allows smaller birds to continue feeding.

When attracting birds into your yard, you should also take steps to protect the birds from neighborhood cats. Placing feeders at appropriate heights (5 to 6 feet above the ground) and in areas away from thick shrubbery and underbrush is helpful. Safety stretch collars with small freely dangling bells can be put on

cats to warn birds of their approach. A fence made of large-mesh chicken wire erected around feeding stations also helps prevent cats from sneaking up on birds and gives birds time to escape.

Home Plantings for Birds

In addition to feeders, you may wish to use plantings to attract a variety of summer and winter birds into the yard. Crabapples, pokeberry, hawthorn, holly, elderberry, beautyberry, flowering dogwood, and eastern red cedar are only a few of the many native plants that attract songbirds year round. Wildflower mixes that contain thistles also entice small songbirds into an area. Red or orange flowered plants such as trumpet creeper, salvia, and coral honeysuckle can be used to attract hummingbirds.

Water

Finally, if you wish to attract birds into your yard, make sure that plenty of fresh water is available. Water is especially important in Alabama during the summer

when rainfall is reduced. Birdbaths provide excellent sources of water year round and are even available with heaters for colder climates.

Automatic Platform Feeder

If you would like to build your own feeder, an automatic platform feeder like the one shown below offers many advantages (Figures 5 and 6). Its hopper-like construction allows for continuous feeding, and the sloped roof prevents contamination of the seed by standing rainwater.

Note that the sloped roof is really a door, attached by small hinges, which allows you to easily refill the feeder. Inside, a central panel creates two separate compartments which can hold two different types of feed. Curved pieces of metal are nailed to the central panel to guide the seed to the openings or feeding slots at the bottom.

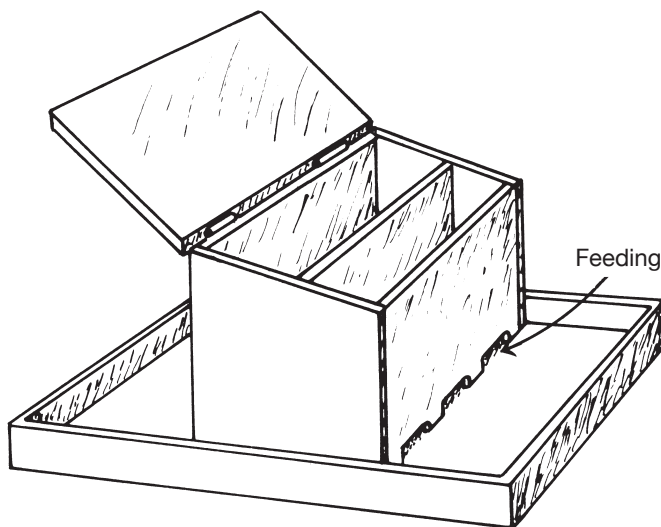


Figure 5. Automatic feeder

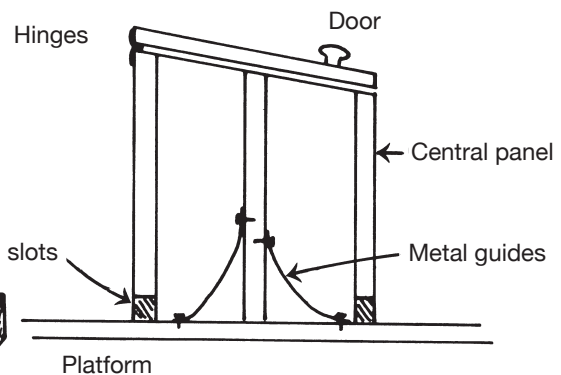


Figure 6. Automatic feeder, cutaway view



Jim Armstrong, *Extension Specialist*, Professor, Forestry and Wildlife Science. Originally prepared by **Lee Stribling**, *former Extension Wildlife Scientist*, and **Karen Fleming**, *former Wildlife Graduate Assistant*, all with Auburn University

For more information, contact your county Extension office. Visit www.aces.edu/directory.

The Alabama Cooperative Extension System (Alabama A&M University and Auburn University) is an equal opportunity educator and employer. Everyone is welcome! Please let us know if you have accessibility needs.

Sept 2010, ANR-0554 © 2020 by the Alabama Cooperative Extension System. All rights reserved.